

From Biblical Dating to Betrothal: A Review of the Christian Courtship Movement

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Abstract

This paper reviews the literature on the Christian courtship movement, a recent (since the 1980s) trend among evangelical, conservative, and fundamentalist Christians in the U.S. that has also spread to the U.K. and Australia/New Zealand. Christian courtship refers to a pattern of relationship formation that is touted as (1) an alternative to recreational dating and (2) a return to historic and Biblical practices. It has particular appeal for conservative home schooling families that desire to shield their children from influences of the mainstream culture and/or to ensure that they choose spouses with equally conservative values. Christian courtship takes a variety of forms, from “Biblical dating” (dating with the purpose of marriage) to “courtship” (pursuing an exclusive, progressively romantic relationship toward marriage under parental supervision) to “betrothal” (making a binding marriage commitment, arranged or authorized by parents, before pursuing a romantic relationship). When viewed through the dual lens of Family Communication Patterns Theory and Uncertainty Reduction Theory, these forms emerge along a spectrum that generally corresponds to (1) increasingly conservative religious values, (2) increasingly patriarchal gender relations, and (3) increasingly protective FCP. Courtship patterns thus emerge as a family-managed and/or -controlled means of uncertainty reduction that works to conserve the inherited FCP and religious values of the courting family. Since Christian courtship is relatively untouched in current communication literature, this paper emphasizes popular publications of and about the movement: books, websites, magazines, and blogs. (For comparison, the paper also reviews literature on arranged marriage in conservative Islamic families.) While courtship and betrothal conserve FCP, they also serve as symbols of Christian values: marital fidelity, the anticipated return of Christ, and the link between the two.

Keywords: Family Communication Patterns Theory, Uncertainty Reduction Theory, courtship, dating, betrothal, arranged marriage, religion, patriarchy, conservatism

From Biblical Dating to Betrothal: A Literature Review of the Courtship Movement among
American Evangelicals

Introduction/Rationale

Statement of the problem

This paper examines uncertainty reduction strategies in romantic relationships used by conservative Christian young adults and their families (Biblical dating, couple-directed courtship, father-directed courtship, and betrothal) and the relationship of these strategies to family communication patterns. As preparation for a potential study, whether quantitative (a survey of relational satisfaction among couples matched through courtship) or qualitative (an ethnographic study of specific courtship practices), the paper presents extracts from the relevant literature by courtship advocates and critics. It also cites the author's personal experience, including a conversation with betrothal advocates.

Specific purpose

This paper limits its scope to certain behaviors within the following groups: conservative evangelical Protestants, fundamentalist Protestants, conservative confessional Reformed Protestants, and Torah-observant Hebrew Roots Christians. It leaves out other groups that practice forms of courtship: for instance, fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints, Orthodox Jews, and some conservative Anabaptists. It also glosses over the history of dating and courtship practices prior to the 1960s, as these are simply beyond the scope of the present study.

Significance of the study

The significance of this study is primarily cultural and historical. The most conservative advocates of courtship and betrothal cite historical precedent for choosing a mate based on prayer and/or rational consideration rather than emotional and physical attraction. Similar

attitudes are present among conservative Muslims and Jews, but not in the mainstream American culture. Prior to the twentieth century, young women enjoyed recreational activities with multiple beaux, but typically in a chaperoned setting. The transition to recreational dating came between the 1920s and 1950s, with the advent of the automobile, which afforded unprecedented privacy to dating couples.

In the 1960s, the charge against dating was led by Bill Gothard, whose teaching of a hierarchical “chain of command” in family relationships is clearly situated in the psychology of the Cold War era, when a strong “military-industrial complex” (or chain of command) was needed to protect “American values” and provide stability in the form of the status quo. Simultaneously, fundamentalism reproduced itself in a new American generation, reacting to increased liberalism (and – of interest to those who study fundamentalist child rearing methods – possibly augmented by PTSS among survivors of the Great Depression and the Two World Wars). American evangelicalism as well as fundamentalism was affected by (1) a Gnostic dualism between body and spirit, (2) a holiness-obsessed ethos from the Puritan/pietist heritage, and (3) a holdover emphasis on celibacy/chastity from medieval Roman Catholicism, which together would translate into discomfort with sexuality and romance. Furthermore, American culture was still strongly threaded through with patriarchal values. The historical context of the courtship movement demonstrates why a study of this movement is essential. Families that practice courtship often do so within a web of related messages and meanings about gender, sexuality, theology, worship, education, family life, friendship, emotions, and recreation.

Literature Review

As Fitzpatrick (2004) explains, Family Communication Patterns Theory places families on two axes: conformity and conversation. Families high on conformity are “characterized by

uniformity of beliefs and attitudes and interactions that focus on harmony and often obedience to the parents.” Families high on conversation “freely, frequently, and spontaneously interact...without many limitations in regard to time spent and topics discussed” (see Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Consensual families (high on both conversation and conformity) are “characterized by pressure toward agreement and by an interest in new ideas without disturbing the existing power structure within the family. Children in these families may either adopt their parents’ views or escape into fantasies.” Pluralistic families (high on conversation but low on conformity) are “characterized by open, unconstrained discussions that involve all family members, which foster communication competence and independent ideas in children of such families.” Protective families (low on conversation but high on conformity) are “characterized by emphasis on obedience and little concern with conceptual matters. **Children in these families are easily influenced and persuaded by outside authorities**” (emphasis mine). Laissez-faire families (low on both conversation and conformity) are “characterized by little and uninvolved interactions among family members about a limited number of topics. Most members are emotionally divorced from their families. Children of these families are more likely to be influenced by external social groups.”

Fitzpatrick (2004) further explains that FCPs are schemata, or “knowledge structures that...influence attention and perception, memory for messages, inferences communicators draw from behaviors, and psychosocial outcomes (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004).” As Fowler, Pearson, & Beck (2010) demonstrated, the schemata of FCP in families of origin influence adult children’s use of interpersonal behaviors for maintaining a committed romantic relationship. Conversation orientation was positively related to seven relational maintenance behaviors: assurances, openness, conflict management, shared tasks, positivity,

advice, and social networks, while conformity orientation was negatively related to conflict management. As Fowler et al. note, their findings confirmed research by Koesten (2004) showing that individuals from high conversation-oriented families tend to have stronger interpersonal skills.

The Family Communication Patterns and Theology Spectrum

Families in the Christian courtship movement – of whom a large (even an overwhelming) majority home school their children – tend to have either a consensual or a protective orientation. Many choose to home school for religious reasons; they are strong on traditional values (conformity). Many also choose home schooling because they highly value spending time and building quality relationships with their children; they are strong communicators on a variety of subjects (conversation). Such families are consensual. Depending on their church affiliation and other factors (e.g., living in a patriarchal culture), other families emphasize conformity at the expense of conversation; these families are protective. Fitzpatrick (2004) describes the difference, in terms that can aptly apply to home school families: “Although the climate in [consensual] families is lively, warm, and interesting, the hierarchy in the family remains largely unchallenged,” while protective families “downplay interaction, maintaining an appearance of family peace and harmony by prohibiting dissent.” The author of this paper, as an adult child of a home schooling family, experienced an FCP that combined consensual and protective characteristics. Similarly, she identifies her family’s place on the theological spectrum as falling between conservative evangelical and fundamentalist. While there is a surprising amount of diversity in the Christian home school community (as in the larger evangelical community), this author has observed that more conservative families tend toward a protective orientation. This

parallels Grasmick, Wilcox, & Bird's (1990) finding that fundamentalism (defined as belief in a literal interpretation of the Bible) strongly predicts patriarchal values.

The Courtship Spectrum

Courtship practices reflect FCP *and* theology (which are often intimately entwined) at various points along the spectrum. Robin Phillips, a home school graduate (now husband and home schooling father) who has compiled his firsthand observations of courtship into the e-book *The Way of a Man with a Maid* (available at <http://robinphillips.blogspot.com/>), offers the following comprehensive definition of courtship

(<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/largerhope/Courtship%20&%20Betrothal%20Essays/C%20&%20B.htm>):

[It] is a parentally supervised relationship with the opposite sex that is a preparation for marriage. Though the interaction usually occurs in an overseen or semi-supervised family environment, variations can include everything from an arranged marriage to simply pursuing a relationship with the parents' consent. Above all, it attempts to bypass the dangers of the modern dating system through some form of parental involvement. Usually this includes the idea that a relationship must be entered into only after marriage is either already expected or a definite possibility. It is conducted with the understanding that the father has power throughout to give the green light or red. The courtship serves as a kind of testing ground for the father to see if this person is really right for his child.

Phillips then asks:

How is it that young people, having reached the age of independence, are happy to be dictated to? To answer this it must be stressed that ideas can only work in the context of a family where a strong sense of control has been fostered, and where the individuality and

independence which usually develops has been stifled at every turn. Such a backdrop is absolutely essential for the operation of ‘courtship’.

Examining the literature bears out Phillips’s assessment. Courtship practices vary depending on FCP and theology, but the difference is often mainly in emphasis rather than substance. The use of uncertainty reduction tactics in courtship also reflects FCP and theology.

Biblical Dating

To generalize, to the far left (off the spectrum) would be mainline Christians who practice recreational dating similar to mainstream American culture; they likely come from low-conformity families and manage uncertainty reduction through unscripted, unsupervised conversation. Actually on the spectrum would be evangelicals who practice “Biblical dating,” or dating for the purpose of finding a spouse (with traditional sexual guidelines in place). Principles for Biblical dating can be found in Christian dating advice books and in webzines like Focus on the Family’s *Boundless* (<http://www.boundless.org/>), whose advice seems aimed at independent young adults in the mainstream culture. A poignant piece of advice at *Boundless* comes from editor Candice Watters, who recounts how she “pulled a Ruth” and demanded that her long-time friend (and long-term crush) Steve define the relationship.

I needed him to make it official to be sure I wasn’t wasting the most eligible days of my life in an endless holding pattern. “If you’re not ready to state your intentions,” I said, “then you may no longer have access to me: my time, affections or friendship.” I was asking him to lead. If he led to a commitment, I would follow. And if he led to more platonic friendship, it would have to end. I was serious about being willing to walk away from him, and he knew it.

I was asking a version of the question that used to be asked by a woman's dad: "What are your intentions for my daughter?" I was in essence asking him, "What are your intentions for me?" (<http://www.boundless.org/relationships/2012/learning-from-ruth-part-1>)

Watters's story of "pulling a Ruth" (an allusion to the Moabite widow who forced Boaz to propose) is not as liberated as it sounds, despite the fact that it features an unsupervised adult relationship and a woman taking the initiative. The context makes clear that Candice Watters took the initiating role because Steve was not doing so; she "pulled a Ruth" because, like Ruth, she found herself in a less than ideal situation. (Parent-directed courtship advocates would point out that she was placed in the awkward position of having to ask the young man to state his intentions because *she had no father to protect her.*) The dating advice at places like *Boundless* is actually quite close in spirit to the advice that comes from a little further to the right on the spectrum: from Joshua Harris, the first author to receive mainstream reception for a book on couple-directed courtship.

Couple-Directed Courtship

Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude toward Relationships and Romance* (1997) was a runaway success in his home community: that is, among conservative evangelical home school families looking for a counter-cultural alternative to the increasingly wild teen dating scene. Though home schooled, Harris himself had gone through multiple casual relationships (and heartbreaks) in high school. At seventeen, he resolved to put recreational dating behind him until he was ready for marriage. It is clear from *IKDG* and Harris's subsequent books (*Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*, *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is): Sexual Purity in a Sex-Saturated World*), as well as his current role as senior pastor of an Sovereign Grace Ministries-affiliated church (a cross between evangelical and Reformed), that

he was raised in a theologically conservative – not fundamentalist – home; it also seems likely that he was raised with a consensual FCP. He relates no instances of his parents placing limitations on his high school dating choices, for example. Exploring a variety of blogs (including, but not limited to, <http://thewartburgwatch.com/> and <http://darcysheartstirrings.blogspot.com/>) reveals that *IKDG* readership ranged widely, but commonly resembled Harris himself (home schooled, conservative, from a close family, and generally eager to live a Christian life). Harris's books assume that many of his readers have experienced recreational dating and are ready for an alternative. In sum, Christian courtship advice successfully reached not only parents, but teens and young adults who wanted their parents to take a more active role in their journey toward marriage. Similar books by Leslie Ludy (2007) and Eric and Leslie Ludy (2004) assume that their teenage and college-age readers can choose to forego dating and invite their parents to become their "teammates" during the courtship process. This kind of choice is possible in a consensual, pluralistic, or laissez-faire family type, but not likely in a protective family type.

Parent-Directed Courtship

Harris, Ludy & Ludy, and others envision courtship as a couple-directed process, augmented by parental participation. They encourage young adults to manage uncertainty reduction through conversation (about theological beliefs and marriage roles, as well as practical concerns), with progressively greater emotional intimacy but without sexual involvement. Couples are encouraged to agree on boundaries for kissing, hugging, and other physical contact before marriage. The bright line that divides consensual and protective families, however, seems also to divide couple-directed courtship from parent-directed (technically, father-directed) courtship. Courtship was a concept in certain home school circles long before Joshua Harris

kissed dating goodbye, popularizing the idea among his public and private school peers. Phillips (2008), in *The Way of a Man With a Maid*, explains that Bill Gothard began teaching courtship as an alternative to dating in the late 1960s at his Institute for Basic Life Principles seminars (which later expanded to include the Advanced Training Institute, offering home school curriculum and a paramilitary summer camp). Gothard began his career teaching “character training” to troubled juveniles (the IBLP “Red Notebook” of principles for godly living was originally designed for his secular Institute for Basic Youth Conflicts seminars in juvenile detention centers and group homes) and then transitioned into teaching parents to use the same “character training” with their children. Gothard’s audience was made up of conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists; as the Christian home schooling movement arose from the 1970s onward, home school families gravitated toward his teachings.

Phillips (<http://robinphillips.blogspot.com/2008/03/bill-gothard-ati.html>) notes that the ATI home school and Bible study curriculum emphasizes setting goals, taking vows before God, and relying on “life principles” such as Scripture meditation to “prosper” in every area of life. Families that wish to use ATI curriculum must sign a statement agreeing to lifestyle rules (e.g., the father will lead family devotions using Gothard’s materials, the mother will not work outside the home, the parents will not allow secular music in the home, and more). Gothard’s signature teaching is the “Chain of Command” or “Umbrella of Authority”: God has established authority figures for our good, and we will prosper as long as we remain “under” our authorities, but if we step “out” on our own, we will suffer spiritual attacks from Satan. The umbrella teaching is the basis for his courtship teaching: “Courtship is a father’s agreeing to work with a qualified young man to win his daughter for marriage.” Teens or young adults that step out from under the father’s umbrella to date a boyfriend or girlfriend will, of course, suffer spiritually (not to

mention expose themselves to the worldly dangers of promiscuity, STDs, broken hearts, and divorce).

Father-Directed Courtship and Patriarchy

Father-directed courtship and its close cousin, betrothal, manage uncertainty reduction in a fundamentally different way from couple-directed courtship. Rather than placing the man and woman on the same level to work through their relational dialectics as a team, with parental or pastoral assistance when requested, father-directed courtship places a young man and an older man on a level to negotiate the marriage of the older man's daughter. The girl's father functions as her representative – a concept to which Candice Watters barely alluded when she “pulled a Ruth.” The father uses conversation (scripted according to his prerogatives, often based directly on principles or questions articulated by courtship movement leaders) to brook unwanted suitors and ensure his daughter has a chance to emotionally bond only with the chosen candidate. He also controls the conversation between the suitor and his daughter. Gothard follower Howard Grant recounted of his twenty-eight-year-old daughter's courtship,

In a sense, the whole courtship hinged on this principle - a full agreement that there must not be a 'private' relationship built up. Without such an understanding, it's not a true courtship. That's why an understanding about letters and phone calls is so important, because for most people these things become key building blocks toward privacy.

Since wifely submission is prioritized in Gothard's teachings, the daughter's role is to ensure that she gives the proper submissive messages to the suitor and his parents once the courtship begins.

Lisa at <http://brokendaughters.wordpress.com/> recalls starting a courtship at age eighteen “**with a man whom I hadn't talked more than 10 words to**” but who “admired my quietness and meekness, my willingness to be simple and how I never complained.”

As the courtship proceeded, Lisa's father and her suitor (Harry) had weekly private telephone conversations, and Lisa was asked to talk to Harry under her father's supervision every few days. When Harry came to visit, **"I tried very hard to present myself a suitable spouse to both Harry and his family.** I was smiling constantly, in a friendly, quiet manner. I served the meals. I jumped up whenever somebody needed something from the kitchen." In her first face-to-face courtship conversation with Harry, Lisa managed uncertainty reduction not by sharing her thoughts and values, but by mimicking feminine submissive signals.

After dinner, we got some time to talk in a corner of the living room, still in hearing distance and observed by everyone but somewhat more private. We got talking about how we imaged our life together should be like. Actually, I didn't say much except for the occasional "I would love that" and "Oh it would be such an honor to be your supporter with this." Though I didn't know about guys, I certainly knew how to copy my mom's behaviour towards my dad (all emphases in original).

Elsewhere on her blog, Lisa describes her upbringing. Her family was fundamentalist, patriarchal, and Quiverfull (that is, they believed in receiving every child God would give them, rather than limiting their fertility; while similar to the "openness to life" espoused by Roman Catholic teaching, Quiverfull ideology goes beyond it in promoting "militant fecundity" by conservative Christians as the solution to America's culture wars). Her description of an extremely protective, low-conversation FCP dovetails with other accounts at

<http://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com/>, <http://www.quiveringdaughters.com/>, <http://undermuchgrace.blogspot.com/>, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nolongerquivering/>, and <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/>.

Father-Directed Courtship and Stay-At-Home Daughters

Father-directed courtship is popular among certain non-fundamentalist confessional Reformed Protestants, as well. Vision Forum Ministries, located near San Antonio, Texas, and headed (until November 2013) by Doug Phillips, has disseminated courtship and “Biblical patriarchy teachings” to legions of evangelical home school families in the Bible Belt. Phillips is publicly linked to other patriarchy proponents: Scott Brown (director of the National Center for Family Integrated Churches), Geoff Botkin (media producer for Christian Right causes and former member of the cult organization Great Commission Ministries), and Doug Wilson (founder of a classical Christian school in Moscow, Idaho, and author of his own courtship manual, *Her Hand in Marriage*; while Robin Phillips praises *Her Hand in Marriage* as a balanced, non-fundamentalist work, Wilson is known for his paleo-Confederate affiliations and for controversial remarks, such as a statement that conjugal sex should not be an “egalitarian pleasuring party”), among others. These patriarchs eschew association with fundamentalism, but promote the “Stay-At-Home-Daughter” movement publicized in Anna Sofia and Elizabeth Botkin’s book *So Much More: The Remarkable Influence of Visionary Daughters on the Kingdom of God* (2005), published by Vision Forum. Joyce (2010) notes that the courtship of Scott Brown’s daughter Kelly by Peter Bradrick is upheld as a model for stay-at-home-daughters who, in Brown’s words, have “decided to see how the Lord will work through their fathers in helping them evaluate men,” “have the right kind of affections for the right kind of man,” and “guard their hearts and emotions” – or even to “completely submit to him [the father] in the decision about whom to marry.” Fathers can find potential suitors for their daughters by networking with other patriarchs at Vision Forum conferences.

As in fundamentalist courtship, the father manages uncertainty reduction by requiring the suitor to meet certain standards. Joyce writes:

Peter's courtship of Kelly had begun, breathless accounts tell, with her father, whom he approached and had to win over long before he ever displayed his interest in Kelly. Peter wrote more than a dozen "position papers" for Scott Brown on everything from politics and theology to child training and marital roles for husband and wife, all backed by biblical arguments for what Peter expected from his future wife.

....

After he had successfully wooed Scott Brown, Peter received permission to correspond and talk with Kelly, where they eschewed emotion for doctrine, discussing the Bible's rules for marriage, housekeeping, and what Kelly's role would be as a helpmeet.

The daughter's role, meanwhile, is to reduce uncertainty about her submissive disposition as a potential wife by remaining in the background. Kelly Bradrick says, "It shouldn't be for a daughter to be making herself exposed searching for someone." Sarah Faith Schlissel (now Hodges), in her essay "Daddy's Girl: Courtship and a Father's Rights" (published in the late 1990s, when she was nineteen and unmarried), writes that "God himself defers to the will of the father when it comes to his daughter." The final arbiter of uncertainty is not God's will, but the patriarch's will.

Critics of the SAHD movement and of father-directed courtship abound. Jon Zens (2011) writes, "Stacy McDonald [proponent of Christian patriarchy to wives and daughters] and others have encouraged young women to always be accompanied by an adult when out of the home, and some do not allow daughters to even get a driver's license." He notes that the Botkin sisters, in *So Much More*, use the term "helpmeet" to refer to a SAHD's relationship with her father until he chooses a husband for her, and that McDonald, in *Raising Maidens of Virtue*, suggests that a daughter should give her father a small charm as a symbol of her virginity and her heart, of

which two things the father is the “kingly defender” until he bestows them on her husband at marriage. Vision Forum has offered annual Father-Daughter Retreats and promoted Purity Balls where fathers and daughters make this exchange in a public ceremony, documented by Holly Adams Phillips (2009). Robin Phillips (2008) records a similar (private) ritual in which Jonathan Lindvall (Gothard follower who now advocates for binding betrothal rather than courtship) gave a locket to his twelve-year-old daughter, while keeping the key, and asked her to “Give me your heart” (Proverbs 23:26) until he and her mother believed God had revealed the man she was to marry. Uncertainty reduction in father-directed courtship thus begins with the daughter’s commitment to submit to her father (which may entail living at home until marriage), continues with the father’s evaluation of a potential husband (Zens [2011] notes that James and Stacy McDonald suggest a 163-question list they have used with their daughters’ suitors), and concludes with the daughter’s submission to her father’s wisdom in selecting the right man for her. Clearly, these uncertainty reduction strategies spring directly from protective FCP dynamics.

Courtship, Betrothal, and Uncertainty Reduction

To understand the effect of FCP on uncertainty reduction, we must set FCP in its context: a reliance on the family system, rather than the individual, to legitimize relationship choices. To illustrate: Fox (1975) found that Muslim arranged marriages in modernizing Turkey exemplified the theme of “love as fission” (an uncontrollable force that might produce an unsuitable match) rather than “love as fusion” (a force that unites two people for life). Fox explains that arranged marriage in extended family systems is a gatekeeping practice that enables elders to control wealth and inheritance by controlling who enters the family unit. Traces of these gatekeeping values still adhere in modernizing Muslim cultures, as found by Nasser, Dabbous, & Honeycutt (2010). Among Lebanese Muslims, arranged marriage has metamorphosed from a closely

controlled process with no engagement period into a joint process involving man, woman, and both sets of parents, with an engagement period of one to four years. Couples expressed fear of choosing a partner based on emotion rather than rational assessment, lest they be hurt (e.g., lest emotions lead to an unsuitable match). Both men and women reported that they suppressed “non-spiritual” (romantic) emotions until after the *qiran*, or engagement ceremony. Men and (particularly) women reported parental monitoring, and both sought parental advice early in the relationship. To complement the strategies of emotional restraint and parental involvement, these Muslim couples emphasized conversation as a means of uncertainty reduction.

A similar reliance on parental approval, rooted in the same need to make emotions legitimate through a rational choice, appears in statements of Christian men and women (<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/largerhope/Courtship%20&%20Betrothal%20Essays/History.htm>) who are betrothed: “I can begin to emotionally connect because it’s safe,” “I don’t want to even *know* about someone being interested in me until we are betrothed!” The desire to protect against unwanted emotions (e.g., emotions toward someone who may not become a spouse) inspired a similar strategy of uncertainty reduction among couple-directed courtship advocates (Harris et al.), who urge couples to restrain their emotions until they have evaluated a partner’s maturity, suitability, and spiritual commitment. Some who fall further to the right on the conservative spectrum (again, in both theology and FCP) have developed an even more foolproof means for reducing uncertainty: binding betrothal. Phillips (2008) quotes Lindvall, who cites submission to authority as the quintessential uncertainty reduction strategy:

As we go through the right way, I think there are enough safeguards that we can be pretty sure that you're not going to get the wrong person if you do it the right

way. How are we going to know it's the right person? God will speak, and God has revealed in His word that He speaks through authorities in all of our lives.

Lindvall follower Israel Wayne (<http://biblicalbetrothal.com/shouldwekcg.htm>) argues for replacing courtship with betrothal because courtship (by the dictionary definition) means “wooing” or “flattery,” which could leave a man or woman open to being “defrauded” by a partner who puts up a false front. Instead, he writes, the Biblical method is a covenant relationship based on commitment, which immediately follows the friendship stage. “During the betrothal stage, they have the freedom to become emotionally bonded with each other, since both have committed to marriage.” Commitment is clearly counterposed to any other means of reducing uncertainty about a partner (e.g., physical attraction, social attraction, task attraction).

Courtship, Betrothal, and Alexithymia

Other factors besides a protective FCP help explain this type of highly controlled uncertainty reduction. Children and parents may suffer from alexithymia. (*Alexithymia* refers to the inability to understand and communicate emotion in oneself or in others; the term means “without words for emotions”). Hesse & Floyd (2011) found that, in an initial interaction, relational partners had lower levels of physical attraction, social attraction, and task attraction to persons with alexithymia. Alexithymics face greater difficulty in accomplishing the tasks of uncertainty reduction as defined by Berger & Calabrese (1975). The uncertainty reduction task of particular interest to us here, in a courtship context, is that of “increasing positive outcomes such as liking, reciprocal selfdisclosure, and intimacy.” Hesse & Floyd note that research has linked alexithymia to several factors: living in a rural area, being an unwanted child, being born into a family with many children, receiving low levels of affection in the individual's closest relationships, or even surviving a traumatic event. (Note: PTSS is often a symptom of childhood

abuse, markedly so in children of fundamentalist households. Please see *Spare the Rod: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* [Greven, 1990] and *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment* [Heimlich, 2011].)

For many children of conservative/fundamentalist families – especially families that follow ATI or Quiverfull teachings – all of these factors are likely to be present. (Compare Hilary McFarland’s account of her fundamentalist Quiverfull upbringing in *Quivering Daughters: Hope and Healing for the Daughters of Patriarchy* [McFarland, 2010] and at <http://www.quiveringdaughters.com/>.) Accounts such as those at <http://jensgems.wordpress.com/> suggest that similar effects befall women and children families that follow the Vision Forum model of patriarchy.

Therefore, several explanations of the conservative/fundamentalist preference for parent-arranged courtship and/or betrothal emerge. One is a desire to protect the family culture, as in the Muslim families examined above. Another is a fear of modern culture’s fragmentation away from the nuclear family structure, as explained in the Introduction/Rationale. Yet another is the fact that young people raised with a protective FCP tend to trust authority figures over their own instincts. Furthermore, those raised with fundamentalist beliefs are encouraged to view outsiders as “worldly”; therefore, they are accustomed to making friendship choices based on a relational partner’s religious values rather than on physical, social, or task attraction. Since their religious values emphasize being “set apart” from what the world normally considers attractive, and they are often raised in relative isolation from mainstream society, such young people may not have learned how to present themselves to a relational partner in a way that maximizes physical, social, or task attraction. Additionally, the culture espoused by Vision Forum-style patriarchs has roots in the sexual honor code of the antebellum South (abundant documentation exists at

<http://fiddlrts.blogspot.com/2013/02/patriarchy-christian-reconstructions.html> and related links), which begs comparison to the Muslim modesty code ('*ird*') noted by Fox (1975). Finally, there may be an intergenerational pattern of alexithymia thanks to the above-named factors (rural lifestyle, large family, emotional neglect, and/or trauma).

Betrothal and Religious Metaphor

The final explanation, however, is more transcendent. In much the same way that Harris (1997) and other advocates of couple-directed courtship suggest courtship is a chance to draw closer to God through practicing sexual and emotional restraint, betrothal advocates urge couples to see their betrothal in a spiritual light. Most evangelicals, as well as mainline Christians, agree that marriage is a metaphor for the relationship of Christ and His Bride (see Ephesians 5:25-27). Betrothal advocates take this further, making betrothal – a binding commitment to marry, made prior to emotional involvement – the metaphor. This metaphor appears frequently in the Torah-observant/“Hebrew Roots” movement (a relatively new, relatively diverse movement that clusters around several major teachings: since believers in the Messiah are “grafted in” to Israel, they should demonstrate their faith by observing Torah; Torah and the New Covenant can be properly understood only by reading Scripture in its first-century Jewish context, free of accumulated Hellenic/Roman traditions; and believers’ return to Torah is a major eschatological signpost). Here a blogger updates Lindvall’s betrothal teachings for a Torah-observant audience:

.....I want to relate to you why God would want us to get to the marriage alter [*sic*] by betrothal. It is the first and foremost way to portray [*sic*] Christ's relationship with us.

When you see a young man become betrothed to a young woman, you are seeing the same relationship that our Lord and Saviour has established with us, the Church. We are betrothed to Yeshua, Jesus Christ. This young man and young woman are a perfect

witness to the world of Yeshua and the Church....

...If our Father planned and created betrothal for our marriage to His Only Begotten Son, how can we choose to go with a different way to get to the marriage altar? (the world's way!) [sic] <http://sallyfromthefarm.blogspot.com/2009/11/betrothal-but-why.html>

The most high-profile betrothal advocates among Torah-observant families may be the Waller family, whose son Brayden's betrothal to his fiancée Tali was memorialized in a feature-length film, marketed on the Wallers' website (<http://www.hayovel.com/>) to educate other families about the process. This author spoke with a Torah-observant couple who observed the betrothal of a twenty-year-old daughter of family friends, modeled after the Waller betrothal. The couple explained,

The goal is to protect the girl from rejection. When the boy finds a girl he wants to marry, he goes to his parents, and they pray with him about it; if they think she is a good match for him and he is mature enough for marriage, he can go to her parents for their approval. But she holds the veto card. Once she knows he's committed to her, she can wait as long as she wants to decide. This gives her opportunities to get to know him and have a feeling of safety in saying yes. If she says no, the man can handle rejection better.

The couple described a patriarchal family ("The daughter was still under her father's authority") and strictly controlled uncertainty reduction ("Her parents decided when they could hold hands"). At the same time, they described an FCP between protective and consensual ("These are all home school parents, very strict in their beliefs, that have a good relationship with their children and are able to communicate very well. It's so important for the father to be involved at home, so the boy can seek wise counsel and the girl feels free to share her feelings") and uncertainty reduction that takes into account physical, social, and task attraction ("There will be

emotions involved. [Our friends' daughter] worked through her feelings with her dad before she said yes") as well as religious values ("The parents might turn him down first, based on what they know of his beliefs and behavior"). The essence of betrothal is described not as protection against a poor marriage choice (though this is considered a benefit), but as the chance to portray an eschatological metaphor that is the fulcrum of the Torah-observant religious worldview.

Brayden [Waller] went away to prepare a house, and they did not see each other. They really wanted to have a picture of when Jesus comes back. The whole betrothal is a picture of how God woos us as His Bride; He is committed to us, even when we reject Him.

Courtship and Commitment

This motivation for betrothal, even if it is shaped and informed by previous teachings about courtship (for example, it is important to note that many Torah-observant families come out of fundamentalist or conservative evangelical church backgrounds), unites full circle with statements from Harris (1997) about the real reason to pursue couple-directed courtship: to enrich one's intimate relationship with Christ and, thereby, have more fulfilling unity with a spouse. Harris writes, "I believe that the fundamental problem with relationships today is that we've disconnected romance and commitment." Despite the often troubled family dynamics (patriarchy, alexithymia, fear of outsiders) that may inspire parents to pursue the courtship alternative for their children, the courtship movement exemplifies a truth that is frequently mocked or ignored in modern American society. Harris calls this The Little Relationship Principle: *The joy of intimacy is the reward of commitment*. The courtship movement offers a window into an entire religious worldview, along with its associated values and family communication patterns. If evangelicals are to achieve their oft-stated goal of witnessing to the

world of the unconditional love between Christ and His Bride, the Church, the first step is to build committed, intimate marriages where rejection need not be feared, because it is not an option.

(c) Sharon Barrett - SAMPLE

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